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ABSTRACT

The labor force participation of women with young children has increased dramatically in recent years, stimulating research concerning how perceptions of a woman's competence and personality are affected by her employment and family roles. Relatively little is known, however, about perceptions of women with very young children. This study explored the effect of level of job performance (outstanding versus below-average) on perceptions of employed women described as either divorced or married and as having either an infant or no children. Subjects (N=208) were male and female college students. They evaluated a stimulus person on 28 scales describing personality traits, professional competence, and performance attributions. Each subject rated one of eight employed women depicted as either an outstanding or below-average worker, divorced or married, with one or no children. Compared to below average workers, outstanding workers were rated as better adjusted, especially if they were mothers, and more competent, especially if they were not mothers. Married women were perceived as better adjusted than divorced women. Mothers were viewed as more nurturant than nonmothers. Attributions of effort were greater for mothers than for nonmothers. (Author/ABL)

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PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN: INFLUENCE OF PERFORMANCE, MARITAL AND PARENTAL VARIABLES

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Abstract

104 female and 104 male college students evaluated a stimulus person on 28 scales describing personality traits, professional competence, and performance attributions. Each subject rated one of 8 employed women depicted as either an outstanding or below-average worker, divorced or married, with one or no children. Compared to below-average workers, outstanding workers were rated as better-adjusted (especially if they were mothers) and more competent (especially if they were not mothers). Married women were perceived as better-adjusted than divorced women. Mothers were viewed as more nurturant than nonmothers. Attributions of effort were greater for mothers than nonmothers.

Perceptions of Women: Influence of Performance, Marital and Parental Variables

The labor force participation of women with young children has increased dramatically in recent years (National Commission, 1986), stimulating research concerning how perceptions of a woman's competence and personality are affected by her employment and family roles. Relatively little is known, however, about perceptions of working mothers with very young children (under age 3), even though this group constitutes the fastest growing segment of the labor force (National Commission, 1986). In addition, while there is ample evidence that outstanding workers are evaluated more favorably than less competent performers (e.g. Arvey, 1979), previous research has not examined whether the level of job performance interacts with marital and parental status to influence perceptions of employed women. To address these issues, the present study explored the effect of level of job performance (outstanding vs. below-average) on perceptions of employed women described as either divorced or married and as having either an infant or no children.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 104 females and 104 males enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a medium-sized midwestern university. Nearly all subjects were 18-21 years old and never-married.

Procedure

Subjects were told that the study concerned the accuracy of first

impressions based on a brief description of a person. Each subject received one of eight booklets in which the description of the stimulus person varied with respect to marital status, parental status, and level of job performance. The description read:

> Ann Davis is 36, married (divorced), and has a one-year-child (no children). She works full-time as a real estate agent. Her work performance is outstanding (below average). She consistently produces a level of sales that exceeds (is less than) that of other real estate agents in her area.

The occupation of real estate agent was chosen based on results of a pilot study indicating that it is perceived as sex-neutral and average in occupational prestige. Each description was read by 13 female and 13 male subjects.

Subjects rated the stimulus person on 24 7-point bipolar scales which described personality traits and professional performance characteristics. The favorable pole of the scale appeared on the left for half the items and on the right for the other half. Subjects also rated on four 7-point scales the degree to which the stimulus person's job performance was influenced by each of four attributional factors: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck.

Results

The ratings for each scale were analyzed using a 2x2x2x2 ANOVA (Performance Level x Marital Status x Parental Status x Subject's Sex). Table 1 presents F values and mean ratings for main effects.

The few significant interactions most likely were chance occurrences and are not reported.

The main effect of performance level was significant on every scale except dedication to family. Outstanding performers consistently were rated more favorably.

Marital status was a significant main effect on six items. Married women were rated as more happy, secure, personally satisfied, stable, affectionate, and dedicated to family than divorced women.

The main effect of parental status was significant on two items. Mothers were rated as more sensitive to others' needs and more dedicated to family than nonmothers. Subject's sex was not significant.

Factor analysis yielded three orthogonal factors designated "professional competence","personal adjustment", and "nurturance". (See Table 2 for loadings of items on each factor.) Factor scores for each factor were analyzed using a 2x2x2x2 ANOVA (Performance Level x Marital Status x Parental Status x Subject's Sex).

The main effect of marital status was significant for the personal adjustment factor, F (1,208) = 4.87, $p<.05$. Married women were perceived as better adjusted (M = .16) than divorced women (M = -.16). Parental status was a significant main effect for the nurturance factor, F (1,208) = 9.50, $p<.01$. Mothers were rated as more nurturant (M = -.23) than nonmothers (M = .23).

Performance level was a significant main effect on the professional competence and adjustment factors, Fs (1,208) = 414.75 and 11.80, $p<.001$, respectively. Outstanding performers were seen

as more competent (M = -.86) and better adjusted (M = .25) than poor performers (Ms = .86 and -.25, respectively). The significant Performance Level x Parental Status interaction for the professional competence factor, F (1,208) = 10.00, p<.002, indicates that outstanding performers without children (M = -1.00) were perceived as most competent, whereas below-average performers without children (M = .99) were perceived as least competent. A significant Performance Level x Parental Status interaction also was obtained for the adjustment factor. Outstanding workers with a child (M = .45) were rated as best adjusted, whereas below-average workers with a child (M = -.34) were viewed as least well-adjusted.

Responses to the four attribution items were compared in a single 2x2x2x2x4 repeated measures ANOVA (Performance Level x Marital Status x Parental Status x Subject's Sex x Attribution). Attribution was a significant main effect, F (3,624) = 191.04, p<.001. Performance was attributed most to effort (M = 5.99), followed by ability (M = 5.19), task difficulty (M = 3.71), and luck (M = 3.08). A significant Marital Status x Parental Status x Attribution interaction, F (3,624) = 3.09, p<.03, indicated that task difficulty was seen as affecting the performance of divorced mothers (M = 4.13) more than that of other groups. Additionally, attributions of effort were greater for married mothers (M = 6.44) and divorced mothers (M = 6.27) than for their childless counterparts (married M = 5.63; divorced M = 5.62).

Discussion

Consistent with previous research (e.g. Arvey, 1979), outstanding

workers were rated as more competent than below-average workers. They also were viewed as better adjusted. Of greater interest were the interactions between performance level and parental status. For outstanding workers, being a mother enhanced evaluations of adjustment but lowered ratings of competence. The opposite pattern was found for below-average workers: having a child lowered ratings of adjustment but increased evaluations of competence. While outstanding workers who were mothers were viewed as expending more work effort than nonmothers, the latter still were seen as more competent, perhaps because they did not have competing family responsibilities. These same family responsibilities may have been viewed as a socially acceptable reason for relatively poor performance. This could explain why below-average workers who were mothers were perceived as more competent than those who were childless.

Women who were perceived as best adjusted had characteristics which are highly valued by society, i.e., married women, and mothers who also were outstanding workers. The below-average worker with an infant may have been perceived as suffering from role conflict or overload, thus lowering her adjustment rating. These findings are related to previous research (e.g., Etaugh & Petroski, 1985; Russell & Rush, 1987) and implications are discussed.

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Table 1: F Values and Mean Ratings for Items as a Marital Status, Parental Status, Performance Level and Sex of Subject

ITEM (Left Pole)	MARITAL STATUS F	Married	Divorced	PARENTAL STATUS F	Children	No Children	PERFORMANCE LEVEL F	Outstanding	Below Average	SEX OF SUBJECT F	Female	Male
Responsible	1.43	3.21	3.39	.89	3.23	3.38	402.75[c]	1.77	4.84	.03	3.32	3.29
Selfish	.07	4.13	4.18	3.28	4.33	3.99	7.52[b]	4.41	3.90	1.67	4.28	4.04
Competitive	.08	3.74	3.69	.08	3.69	3.74	605.41[c]	1.66	5.77	.75	3.79	3.64
Unhappy	4.48[a]	4.31	3.93	.07	4.14	4.10	58.59[c]	4.80	3.44	.24	4.08	4.16
Secure	11.55[c]	3.39	4.10	.00	3.75	3.74	59.01[c]	2.95	4.54	1.58	3.88	3.62
Dedicated to Career	.00	3.65	3.64	.29	3.70	3.60	369.42[c]	1.77	5.53	.06	3.67	3.63
Insen. to Needs of Others	.12	4.13	4.18	4.87[a]	4.34	3.97	11.35[c]	4.43	3.88	.05	4.13	4.17
Great Personal Satisfaction	6.66[b]	3.63	4.13	1.87	3.75	4.01	163.92[c]	2.66	5.10	1.36	3.99	3.77
Unstable	8.73[b]	4.67	4.10	.79	4.47	4.30	85.68[c]	5.29	3.48	1.90	4.52	4.25
Friendly	.08	3.50	3.55	1.43	3.63	3.42	47.41[c]	2.94	4.11	.08	3.50	3.55
Tense	3.42[b]	3.75	3.41	.07	3.56	3.61	5.16[a]	3.79	3.38	.03	3.60	3.57
Dependent	.19	4.69	4.80	.44	4.66	4.83	23.09[c]	5.34	4.15	.44	4.83	4.66
Affectionate	3.93[a]	3.82	4.13	2.21	3.86	4.09	6.13[b]	3.78	4.16	.98	4.05	3.89
Unintelligent	.73	5.02	5.13	1.02	5.13	5.01	253.67[c]	6.06	4.09	1.74	5.15	4.99
Prof. Compet.	.00	3.49	3.50	.39	3.43	3.56	248.77[c]	1.92	5.07	.11	3.53	3.46
Likable	.30	3.39	3.48	.30	3.39	3.48	65.23[c]	2.80	4.08	1.06	3.36	3.52
Unreliable	.42	4.60	4.49	1.54	4.64	4.44	364.36[c]	6.10	2.99	1.85	4.65	4.43
Pers. Adj. Prob.	1.68	4.21	3.98	1.17	4.19	4.00	82.37[c]	4.90	3.29	.05	4.12	4.08
Success in Job	2.76	3.62	3.97	.16	3.84	3.75	340.34[c]	1.82	5.77	.73	3.88	3.70
Uninfluential	.80[b]	4.40	4.25	.80	4.40	4.25	224.92[c]	5.62	3.04	3.62	4.49	4.16
Ded. to Family	5.61[b]	4.01	4.52	32.24[c]	3.65	4.88	3.70[b]	4.47	4.06	.02	4.28	4.25
Unattractive	.08	4.32	4.28	.51	4.25	4.35	28.11[c]	4.65	3.94	.74	4.36	4.24
Comfort.w/ Others	1.77	3.43	3.66	2.77	3.40	3.69	97.54[c]	2.69	4.40	1.23	3.64	3.45
Unsociable	2.55	4.74	4.49	2.17	4.73	4.50	141.67[c]	5.55	3.68	.14	4.64	4.59

NOTE: The left pole of each item was presented in the order shown above. Lower scores indicate ratings toward left pole. Thus, when the favorable pole is on the left, lower scores indicate more favorable ratings, and vice versa. df = 1, 208

[a] $p < .05$

[b] $p < .01$

[c] $p < .001$

Table 2: Varimax-Rotated Factor Loadings

Item (Left Pole)	Factors (1) Professional Competence	(2) Personal Adjustment	(3) Nurturance
Responsible	.78	-.19	.14
Selfish	-.09	.57	-.39
Competitive	.83	-.16	-.04
Unhappy	-.33	.57	-.02
Secure	.68	-.33	.07
Dedicated to Career	.90	-.05	-.04
Insensitive to Needs of Others	-.12	.32	-.67
Great Personal Satisfaction	.84	-.24	.05
Unstable	-.47	.60	-.05
Friendly	.53	.00	.42
Tense	.05	.65	-.20
Dependent	-.07	.36	.13
Affectionate	.14	-.12	.77
Unintelligent	-.63	.23	-.05
Professionally Competent	.84	.03	.06
Likable	.54	-.12	.47
Unreliable	-.70	.32	-.03
Has Pers. Adjus. Problems	-.43	.51	-.20
Successful in [illegible]	.83	-.10	.07
Uninfluential	-.66	.26	-.16
Dedicated to Family	-.12	-.07	.71
Unattractive	-.24	-.05	-.16
Comfortable with Others	.54	-.33	.27
Unsociable	-.52	.36	-.24
Eigenvalue	10.24	2.33	1.37